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Reagan says secrecy vital to U.S. national security

By Mary Belcher
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President Reagan called secrecy a vital element in preserving national security last night, underscoring an ongoing administration crackdown on news organizations reporting classified information.

In a speech to former members of the Office of Strategic Services, Mr. Reagan said, "It's only because secrecy has been your business that you all know how vital it is to your nation's safety and freedom's survival."

The latest administration warning to the press came Wednesday night, when the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency cautioned reporters against speculating or expanding on sensitive information revealed in the espionage trial of Ronald W. Pelton, now going on in Baltimore.

Mr. Reagan conceded that secrecy does not come easily to the open American society.

"Yet our secret services, our spies and intelligence agencies — from Nathan Hale to Midway, from OSS to CIA — have not just written a striking, stirring chapter in our history but have often provided the key to victory in war and the preservaion of our freedom during an uneasy peace," he said.

John Poindexter, the president's national security adviser, approved the warning issued two days ago to reporters covering the Pelton spy trial.

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In an unusual joint statement, Directors William J. Casey of the CIA and Lt. Gen. William E. Odom of the NSA cautioned news agencies that "speculation and reporting details beyond" the sensitive information released in the trial "are not authorized disclosures and may cause substantial harm to the national security."

In his speech last night, the president hailed Mr. Casey as "one of the heroes of America's fight for freedom in the postwar era."

"But in saluting Bill Casey we salute all those, past and present, who carry on the twilight war against totalitarianism," Mr. Reagan said.

The administration has come under increasing criticism from the media and civil libertarians who predict that its crackdown on classified leaks will dampen full and open press reporting.

Recently the administration fired two goverment employees who leaked classified material to the press, and Mr. Casey has threatened legal action against several news organizations, including The Washington Times, for purportedly reporting secret information.

The CIA director has asked the Justice Department to prosecute The Washington Post and NBC News for reporting information Mr. Pelton allegedly provided to the Soviet Union about a secret underwater intelligence-gathering operation.

"There's a much larger issue here that has to be addressed," said White House spokesman Edward Djerejian, responding to questions about the Casey-Odom warning to the press.

"That issue is: When you look at intelligence operations, and especially in a democracy, the fundamental question arises whether or not a country and its people are willing to support a secret intelligence service in this very real and sometimes ugly world we live in," Mr. Djerejian said.

If Americans are willing to support secret operations such as those conducted by the CIA and NSA, he said, "there has to be protection of intelligence sources and methods."

"What has to be understood is, you can't have your cake and eat it, too," Mr. Djerejian said.

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